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ABSTRACT

One of the trends in Native Education in the United States and Canada is the re-emergence of concern for the "old ways," which are looked to increasingly for practical guidance in meeting the challenges of today's world. The old ways teach the purpose of life. Such rituals as fasting, feasting, and spirit quests teach a special way of looking at the world. Beadwork, basketwork, weaving, tanning hides, and traditional fishing are all "processes" of learning which teach not only skills but also visualization, patience and physical coordination. These learning processes are quite different from the more tangible elements of formalized education, "products" such as textbooks, videotapes, and curriculum models: these products are not in themselves the measure of good education. However, Indian educators can use them to improve the learning processes that lead to good education. For example, videotapes can be used to record and preserve the information of the tribal elders. The tapes can then be used to train teachers, as personal interaction between teacher and student will be more effective than videotape alone would be. Indian educators need to determine how they can best use books, videotapes, cultural programs, and other educational products within a school and community setting. (SB)

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From an address given before the 12th General Assembly of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, Vancouver, British Columbia, September 25, 1980.

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The Directions of Indian and Native Education: Culture, Content, and Container

In my work across the United States and Canada with Native American and Canadian Native Education, I see many trends emerging. Some are very healthy and encouraging. There is a re-awakening of concern about the "Old Ways," a looking-back not for the sake of romantic nostalgia, but for practical guidance to meeting the challenges of today's world. More and more Native people are questioning modern values and the very structure of government and organization on both federal and local levels.

The potential for positive change is very great. However, if one stirs up water in a pond in the process of moving oneself, the bottom is disturbed, and the silt tends to obscure seeing what supports the canoe. The purpose of this paper is to look not only at the positive aspects of future Native Education, but also at some of the difficulties we face. As I like to tell people, I am a prophet with a little "p." Prophets with a little "p" look ahead and warn people of dangers that are coming and say "here are some of the ways you might act." A Prophet with a capital "P" looks ahead and warns people of dangers that are coming and says "here is the only way in which you should act. The one thing that the the two classes of Prophets have in common is that the majority of people don't listen.

At any rate, here are some important points to remember in dealing with Native Education. The primary thing is this: Words have power, and can be very dangerous. Our old people have always known this. That is why they sometimes take so long before they say something. They are weighing in their minds what the consequence of their speaking might be. Words, and English words especially, are cages for ideas. Words tend to alter within our minds and change from the description of something "out there in the Real world" into the thing that is being described. This is a hard thought, and like a dog with a bone, I will return to it periodically and shake it with my teeth. For now, consider how easily and carelessly we use words like "Culture," "Oral Tradition," "Education," or for that matter, "Alcoholism," "Drug Abuse," "Crime." Those are words that have really gotten too big for their breeches. We use them without thinking. Everyone has his or her own understanding of what they mean, and because those understandings are not the same, people become disappointed with the various programs that deal with those six topics. The problem is this--when we use those terms, we are really describing in a shorthand way extremely complex relationships between different groups of people. Culture is not like a cake, for example, that we might cut it up and look at one piece at a time. Oral Tradition involves a great deal that is not "Oral" at all. Education as practiced by our ancestors does not correspond with Education as non-Natives define it. Alcoholism, Drug Abuse, and Crime are all related subjects which are sloppy waysof talking about established patterns of interactions between one person and another, and one person and him/herself. Treatment of these "problems" is not to be found by "curing" crime, etc., but in resolving the unhealthy interactions of people. Otherwise we simply treat symtoms. You can lower the temperature

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of a feverish child by throwing him into the snow, but this will not fight the infection that is causing the temperature to rise. If you want to stop an alcoholic from drinking, this is not accomplished in the long run, by simply taking alcohol away from him. You have to look at his relationships with himself, other people around him, and the rest of the world. Unless you alter the relationships that are re-enforcing the drinking behavior, he will drink again as soon as he finds another bottle. This is the difficulty of sending our people away to Treatment Centers where they are in a totally different environment, around totally different people then before, they stop drinking, and then are sent home to the same basic circumstances that they left, which starts the drinking behavior all over again. To understand this better, and the impact on Native Education, I have comprised a list of things to think about:

1. Product and Process are two different things. White culture teaches us to "evaluate", or judge by production. If the number of logs in the timber industry drops, something is wrong. If the number of salmon decreases, something is wrong. We cannot judge our children's achievement by the number of baskets they make, or the salaries they can earn. Beware that you do not end up only looking at the end of a process. Life itself is the journeying, not the destination. The things that have traditionally been done within tribes are a training process. The sweat lodge; "old-time" methods of hunting and fishing; story-telling; Indian dancing--all these teach discipline, teach an attitude towards the Earth Mother and an understanding of what our place is with all our relations. In short, the old ways teach our purpose for being. White society has always shied away from understanding the purpose of Life in terms of the everyday person. The business of Life is life. The traditional Native way maintains and renews Life. That is the focus of our ceremonies, those public renewals not only of our own lives, but the renewal of the Earth Mother's life. White people use terms like "Eco-system" or "Biosphere" as a limited way of understanding of what we mean when we speak of the Earth. But they only look around them. Thus it is alright to pollute one stream, because the majority of people don't live near there; it is alright to build a nuclear plant in a dessert because few people (besides Indians) live there. When you understand all of our lives are only a small part of a greater life--the Earth herself, your attitude changes. You take a larger view--see with the eyes of an eagle, like our old people tell us. When you destroy Life, it is like throwing a stone into a pond. The ripples cannot be stopped. To pollute or dam a stream destroys a salmon run...and will therefore change the lifestyle of a people where culture, economy and religion are based on the Salmon. What we call "witch-fires," the nuclear energy the Whites play with in the interest of economy, cannot be made safe, but only buried. If we see the Earth as a living body, we can understand that putting poison within any part of that body will eventually infect the whole.

This is the ultimate danger of separating process from product, and only seeing product. To only see the end means we are blind to the path that leads to the end we feel we should seek. To be blind to the path means you fail to see other possible avenues and destinations.

Consider this--we talk about "curriculum products," writing textbooks, opening a tribal school. Those are all products. To get to that destination, you need to know what you'll find along the way. But almost all projects involving Indian and Native education, focus on some definable goal for funding purposes. A project will end up with a dictionary, twelve

video tapes and eighteen curriculum modules. But how do you get people to the point of being able to effectively use all these "things?" How do you get the cooperation of the many people involved in making all these "things?" I fear that the American assembly line system has had toogreat an impact into the other areas of work. Good education cannot be measured by the number of books it produces. This is like evaluating the quality of honey by measuring it with a yardstick.

You see, many of us have the worthy goal of wanting our children to be "more traditional" in the sense of values, respect, forms of behavior. We also want them to be able to do as well as they can with such practical matters as earning a living, marriages, and child-rearing. Some people hope that the new cultural programs, new educational systems, bilingual projects, and curriculum products will do this. It doesn't happen like that. I wish it did. Don't you see? If that was the way it worked, then all Indian children who went to White school would have become Whites.

The confusion lies in mistaking product for process. All the elements of traditional life contributed in making a complete Indian in the old days. I've heard old people say "discipline begins on the board," meaning that a tiny baby, strapped to the cradleboard is already being taught certain things that are valued by his or her tribe. The rituals of fasting, spirit quests, giveaways, feasts, all taught things that cannot simply be summed up and poured into a child's ear the way conventional education pours in arthmetic. They are all processes of learning. The skills learned in Beadwork, tanning hides, traditional fishing...all teach patience as well as physical coordination. Beadwork, Weaving, Basket-making...all teach a way of seeing the world in a different way, of being able to "visualize" what doesnot yet exist, learning to see how patterns can be formed or taken away to build something that can be recognized and understood. Think about this.

I am very afraid for the future when we do have x number of books, x number of video tapes, and x number of Native teachers in the classrooms, that many children will still be unruly, take drugs, and drop out of school. Then the community will ask "What went wrong?" When you give our children the end products of things without putting through the process that will allow them to understand not only with their heads, but with their hearts, they will not be able to accept what they have been given, any more than a lot of them today accept geometry, civics, and home economics.

Understand that it is part of my job as a "prophet" to bring up doom and gloom. That's one reason why prophets and Prophets are the sort of people you'd rather know at a distance. What you must remember is we must try. But we will make mistakes. The purpose of prophets is to explain those mistakes and make suggestions to avoid future mistakes. There is still tremendous potential in tribal schools and cultural curriculum, but we must never make the mistake of thinking any one program is going to cure anything more than a symptom.

If you want to end up with a "Traditional" Indian person you're going to have provide all those things which form those values, behaviors, and thought-patterns that we so loosely call traditional. Otherwise it's like trying to come up with a chocolate cake and neglecting to add baking powder, eggs, and sugar. You'll get something, but not what you wanted.

Ask yourself honestly, if a child lacks the discipline that used to "begin on the board," and was enhanced by the skills of beadwork, tanning, fishing, and hunting, as well as everything else, do you really think that

child is going to listen respectfully to an elder coming into a classroom, or sit quietly and watch a videotape of how canoes were made? I am not saying books, videotapes, or cultural programs are not needed. I am saying we need to look very closely at how we can best use these things within a school and community setting. With the small number of elders we have, and the mortality rate being what it is, I think it is vital we record as much as we can from our old people before they are gone. It is a tragedy that so many tribes have to record artificially what would have been taught and remembered in the Old Days. But we have to act swiftly. I would prefer to see what we gather to be used more a a resource and reference, where we train teachers, aides, and older students in what was recorded there, and then have those people work directly with our young children, so they experience the exchange of knowledge first hand. No videotape can possibly replace the presence of an elder. Use Elders if they are willing, but a younger person working with the teaching of an elder is going to be more effective in some ways than a videotape of an elder saying the same thing. This goes back to the concept of interactions between people. Those personal interactions have always been important to Native people. Books and "things" put a distance between a child and what it is you are trying to teach a child. It is the book or film that is talking to a child, not the teacher, and the child is aware of this.

2. Your Question Determines the Answer. I think it's funny that Hollywood has stereotyped us as always asking "How." It is White people that ask "How." It is a White way of education that has led us back to our old people where, armed with a microphone, we ask "How?" "How were canoes made? How did you catch the salmon in those days? How were names given? How do you say _____ in Indian?" How is unimportant to the question "Why?" "Why?" will always give you "how" somewhere down the line. When we mistake product for process we ask "How?". For children who see their own families go out to fish using an aluminum or fiberglass boat with an outboard motor, being taught "How" to build a canoe will have little meaning. It would have a lot more meaning if the class would actually go out the next day and build a canoe. However, if you ask "Why did our people build a canoe the way they did?", it does have relevance. There were spiritual relationships in choosing a tree, in gathering bark and wood. Not everyone was necessarily meant to be a canoe maker. The painted and carved symbols on the canoes of certain coastal Indians all had meaning. To teach a child the relationships between human and forest, carver and wood, human and water, human andfish, is what is important, and not testing a child on knowing what kind of wood was used, or how long canoes were.

The process by which a name is given to a child in many tribes is a very important one, but it is still more important to have children understand why an Indian name is so precious than it is to have the child count the number of blankets given away at a naming. Giving away blankets is part of the "How" of it. The idea of "covering," of surrounding you with love and caring, the understanding that an Indian name is something a person wears, and must therefore always keep clean, are part of the "Why" of it. Why? will always give you How?. How? will rarely give you Why?.

I could go on and on (which is also part of being a prophet with a little "p"), but I want to end on this, to have you turn your thoughts to what is around you. I have serious doubts as to whether or not we can "teach" people anything. I think all we can really do is provide

people with an opportunity to learn. Do you understand the distinction? One is active, the other passive. A person can absorb facts, but until something happens inside him/her, that makes that set of facts part of the person, the facts won't stay. They'll have no foundation or roots and will be washed away.

At the 12th General Assembly of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, an older man got up and explained that as a boy, when he was taught how to fish, his old people showed him the water was really four different colors. Part of knowing where to fish meant knowing these colors and the relations of fish to these colors. I think this is a wonderful image to use in understanding education as it should be for Native people. The top level, or surface level represents the programs we are establishing for our children...all the "things", the books, the school desks, the teachers and video tapes. But that color of the level only exists as a layering of deeper colors. Those other levels are not only the support for the upper level, but the upper levels could not possibly exist without the lower ones, just as you cannot have green except by combining blue and yellow. What ever we do in education has to be in combination with what has gone on before, those traditions, rituals, and learning processes that are all part of the answer when we ask "Why?"

Let me end with a non-Indian story, a zen story. Long ago a wise man was always consulted by his community. His many students would watch him listen to the problem of a person, and then watch him go to his room where he would take out an enormous and beautiful book. He would consult this book for hours, and then return with the answer to the problem. Finally the wise man died, and his students all ran to his room to look at the book. The only thing written in the book was this: Wisdom is knowing the difference between content and container.

In our work in Native education, we have been distracted with an excess number of very beautiful containers. Let's get on with the business of working with content.